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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 004934

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [ASEC](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: DISPERSAL OF OPPOSITION RALLY SPARKS DEBATE OVER
ARROYO ADMINISTRATION TACTICS

REF: MANILA 4875

Classified By: Acting Pol/C Joseph L. Novak for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: The October 14 dispersal of a small Opposition rally has sparked a sharp debate over the GRP's tactics. The Opposition and many in the media have criticized the police, asserting that the use of water cannons was not appropriate, for example. Malacanang -- while not endorsing the specific tactics used on October 14 -- has defended its policy of "calibrated response" to rallies, asserting that protests need municipal permits (which the October 14 demonstration did not have). While Malacanang's desire to keep rallies within limits is understandable (many in the public see the constant stream of protests as an annoyance), the Opposition may be earning some points by making it seem that it is the victim of hard-line tactics. End Summary.

Police Disperse Anti-Arroyo Rally

2. (U) The October 14 dispersal of a small rally near Malacanang has sparked a heated debate over the Arroyo's administration's tactics vis-a-vis Opposition activities. Members of the Philippine National Police (PNP) using water cannons dispersed the small anti-government rally at the Mendiola Bridge, a traditional anti-government protest venue in the vicinity of Malacanang Palace in Manila. Approximately 500-600 participants had converged earlier on Plaza Miranda (another well-known protest site) to denounce President Arroyo and demand her resignation. Key figures at the rally included former vice president Teofisto Guingona, Senator Jamby A.S. Madrigal, leftist party-list Representatives Satur Ocampo and Rissa Hontiveros Baraquiuel, and TV personality Oscar Orbos. They were joined by left-leaning Catholic Bishops Julio Labayen, Antonio Tobias, Deogracias Iniguez, and a clutch of radical priests and nuns from the "pro-poor," anti-Arroyo Kilusang Makabayang Economiya ("Movement for a Nationalist Economy") group. The controversial incident took place when rally participants tried the obligatory "march on Malacanang."

3. (U) When questioned about the incident, the PNP asserted that the group of protesters tried to break through a police cordon to march on the Mendiola Bridge, an area that has recently been designated as a "no-protest" zone by municipal authorities (due to its accessibility to Malacanang). After heated verbal exchanges and minor scuffles, police said they had to disperse the group with high pressure water cannons and ordinary fire hoses. Defending its tactics, the PNP noted that no serious injuries were reported and no arrests were made. (Note: The PNP announced on October 18, however, that it planned to file charges against Guingona, Madrigal, and Orbos for violating the Public Assembly Act, which prohibits holding a rally without a permit. End Note.)

Opposition Denounces Malacanang Tactics

4. (U) The Opposition and many in the media have criticized the police reaction to the rally, asserting that the use of water cannons was not appropriate and that the crowd should have been allowed to march. Newspapers and telecasts, for example, were full of reports on the rally, showing drenched participants and minor scuffles. Press commentators, in both pro-Arroyo and Opposition-leaning newspapers, criticized the PNP's actions, as well as Malacanang's policy on demonstrations (see below). At an Opposition press conference held October 16, rally participants denounced the police action as "a violent" curtailment of the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and -- citing the fact that several in the clergy had been effected -- said it was a matter of "disrespect" to faith and religion. They disclosed their plan to file administrative and criminal charges against the PNP. They also threatened to bring their case to the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), claiming that the incident amounted to "a clear violation of human rights."

15. (SBU) Malacanang and the police also took some flak from an influential source: Archbishop Angel Lagdameo, who is slated to succeed Archbishop Fernando Capalla as head of the Catholic Bishop's Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) on December 1, said the incident was "uncalled for and objectionable." Lagdameo's comments were noteworthy to the extent that he is an influential prelate and generally considered apolitical. Capalla (who is generally considered to be close to the Administration) was quoted from Rome as stating that the whole matter was not a CBCP affair.

Malacanang Defends Its Policies

16. (U) Malacanang -- while not endorsing the specific police tactics used on October 14 -- has defended its "Calibrated Preemptive Response" policy, known widely by the acronym "CPR," in regard to rallies. (Note: The CPR policy was announced on September 21. It basically requires that municipalities enforce strictly the requirements that protests be staged only in designated areas and with government permits. Police may use "reasonable force" to disperse any unauthorized rallies, according to the policy. End Note.) Malacanang officials said that CPR is necessary to protect the public from Opposition attempts "to turn the streets to chaos" via "uncontrolled" rallies and marches. Officials added that the October 14 incident -- while "unfortunate" -- had not change its mind about forcefully dealing with "unpermitted" rallies. For its part, PNP Chief Arturo Lomibao said his organization took responsibility for the incident, saying it was a "judgment call" for the commander on the scene to use high pressure water to break up the rally. An internal PNP investigation of the incident cleared all officers involved, saying their actions were justified.

Comment

17. (C) Malacanang's desire to keep rallies within limits is understandable -- many of the Opposition's public events in recent months have disrupted traffic and impacted negatively on business activities. For example, in the business center of Makati where the mayor is pro-Opposition, there have been a string of rallies in recent months that have tied up commuter traffic for hours. Despite the annoyance that rallies cause, however, the Opposition may be earning some points with the public by making it seem that it is the victim of hard-line tactics -- a view that the media has generally been sympathetic to. Malacanang has also been seen as coming on too strong thanks to recent comments by some GRP officials to the effect that plans to impose "emergency rule" are being studied, though sheerly on a contingency basis (ref A).

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